



THE MAJOR MISSTEPS AT THE BEGINNING **OF MEETINGS...** **...AND HOW TO AVOID THEM**

My own work mirrors the mindset and values presented by Roger Schwarz, an organizational development specialist I follow. Here is one of his articles that you might find relevant. Karen

Most meetings get off course as soon as they start. Starting a meeting or simply a conversation is like launching a spacecraft. (No, you're not on the lookout for aliens). If you start the meeting just a little off course, by the end of it, you'll be way off course. And making course corrections later costs a lot of time and energy.

There are three major missteps at the beginning of meetings, and there are three basic steps you can take to make sure everyone is on board and headed in the same direction:

Misstep One: Start discussing the issue without identifying and agreeing on the purpose.

This misstep creates misunderstanding about why the group is talking about the topic, and therefore people don't know how to contribute.

How to avoid this misstep? Identify and agree on the purpose of the meeting. If you are calling the meeting, let people know *in your first two sentences* what your purpose is for the meeting. *The purpose is not the topic and it's not the agenda.* It's the reason you're discussing the topic and going through the agenda.

"This week we've got a number of complaints from customers about service delivery. The purpose of this meeting is to identify the frequency and type of complaints and develop a process for identifying the root causes so ultimately we can resolve the problems."

After you've stated your purpose, check to see if others have a different understanding or believe other topics need to be added.

"Does anyone have a different understanding of the purpose? Are there any other topics we need to address in order to address this issue?"

Misstep Two: Start discussing the issue without identifying and agreeing on a plan for the meeting. Without an agreed-upon plan, everyone follows their own. This guarantees that people will think that someone is off track. Of course, when you haven't agreed on what the plan is, there is no track to be off.

And how to avoid this misstep? Agree on the process for the meeting. Next, reach agreement on the process for the meeting. Depending on the topic, this could as simple as saying,

"Let's just go around the room and find out what each of you have heard, then we'll decide whether we need to take additional steps."



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You don't have to lay out the entire process for the meeting if it's not clear what the process will be. Just reach agreement on the steps you are clear about.

Misstep Three: Start the meeting without a clear agreement on decision making.

In a lot of meetings, team members think that they will be making the decision as a group and are surprised – and frustrated – to discover that the leader is simply seeking their input.

The antidote here? Identify the roles in the decision-making process. Whatever decision-making process you use, let people know it in the beginning.

“I'd like to reach consensus – that is, unanimous support – on our decision. We only have an hour to discuss this before I need to get an answer to the Senior VP. So, if we can't reach consensus by then, I'll make the decision using the information from our meeting. If I need to make the decision, I'll let you know what it is before we leave.”

After – and only after – you've taken these previous three steps, start discussing the content. Only after you've agreed on the purpose and process, and clarified the roles in the decision-making process are you ready to start discussing the content. You do this by starting with the first step of the process you agreed on.

“Okay, anyone not ready to move to the content? Then let's start with the first step of the process we agreed to use. “

When it's not your meeting. One organization I consulted to placed large signs in each of its conference rooms that read something like,

“If you do not know the purpose of this meeting and your role in it, absolutely do not let the meeting start.”

The point was that making meetings and conversations effective is everyone's responsibility, not just the person who calls the meeting. The same is true here. If you let a meeting start without knowing the purpose, process, and decision-making rule, you cannot contribute effectively to the meeting. That means you're wasting everyone's time.

Try saying something like, “I want to make sure I know how to contribute effectively in the meeting. It would help me if we can spend a couple of minutes getting clear on the meeting purpose, plan, and how any decisions will be made. Would you be willing to spend a couple of minutes on this?”

Best Regards, --Roger Schwarz

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